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Pope Francis shakes hands with John Kerry, President Biden's special envoy for climate issues, during a meeting June 19 at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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U.S. climate envoy John Kerry said he believes the upcoming United Nations' COP28 climate conference has the potential to be as significant as the landmark 2015 Paris climate summit and that he'd like Pope Francis to play a leading role in rallying religious leaders to push for environmental action.

Kerry's remarks came on June 19 directly following a private meeting with the pope at the Vatican, where he said Francis signaled an openness to attending the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference or 28th Conference of the Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, better known as COP28, in person. The high-level meeting will take place Nov. 30-Dec. 12 in Dubai.

In a joint-interview with reporters from the National Catholic Reporter, Catholic News Service, Crux and the Wall Street Journal, Kerry recalled that ahead of the 2015 Paris climate accord, known as COP21 — which led to historic global commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions — the pope helped build critical momentum for that meeting.

Now, he said, is the time to "rekindle some of those embers and start to generate focus."

The release of the pope's 2015 letter "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," which became the first-ever papal encyclical on the theme of ecology, was intentionally timed to build support for the historic 2015 Paris meeting.

"This moment is almost equivalent to Paris," Kerry said of the COP28 meeting.



Pope Francis looks at a gift offered by John Kerry, President Biden's special envoy for climate issues, right, during a meeting that also included Joe Donnelly, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, left, June 19 at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Kerry praised Francis and the Holy See, which last year formally joined the Paris Agreement and the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, as having "remarkable leverage" on climate discussions and said the pope "has constantly been an outspoken and engaged advocate on this issue."

"He believes it very deeply," said Kerry. "He's very troubled by where we are and where we are not, where we should be."

In May, the pope used his annual message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation to press for an end of what he described as the "madness" of the "fossil fuel era," specifically linking the message to the upcoming COP28 meeting.

Kerry, who served from 2013 to 2017 as secretary of state to President Barack Obama, is a practicing Catholic and now serves as the first-ever U.S. Special

Presidential Envoy for Climate.

The meeting between Kerry and Francis came during the pope's first full day of meetings following his recent nine-day hospitalization for a hernia repair surgery.

Kerry said he found the pope in "great form," adding that Francis was "very positive and strong and ready to go."

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While Kerry declined to comment on the Vatican's repeated offers to serve as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, he said that he and the pope discussed the ways in which the war has disturbed the world's ability to focus on other looming crises, including the climate emergency.

He also said the two briefly discussed the fact that the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is currently on a closely watched trip to China and that China and the United States represent 40% of all emissions, something Kerry said requires the "responsibility" of both nations.

When asked what his message would be to fellow Catholics who are out of sync with the pope's environmental push, Kerry ticked off a list of grave environmental concerns facing the world today, including rising environmentally induced asthma among children and the devastating impact the climate crisis is having on poor people, especially those living in cities.

He recalled his own youth, saying that many Catholics were inspired by the late Pope John XXIII's emphasis on the common good and caring for one's neighbors.

"If you connect the dots, it's hard to imagine how you don't come out and say we gotta care about this and we've got to be involved in trying to fix it," he said. "I don't know how you fulfill any Christian obligation, personally, without doing it."

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